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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a model for delivering small group literacy to adult learners. The model provides an implementation plan consisting of four steps: preparing for a group, getting started with a group, developing the group, and bringing the cycle to a close. Suggestions for implementation are provided for each of the four steps. Information covered includes the following: building tutor commitment, tutor orientation, learner orientation, group size, matching tutors and learners, bridging individual and group goals, apprenticeship training for tutors, tutor support, peer learning, and final evaluation. The term "group tutor" is used in place of group leader or instructor in order to broaden the spectrum to include volunteer tutors as well as other types of adult educators. The model was developed as part of a project to design a comprehensive training package for volunteer literacy tutors in Ontario. (Author/KC)

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Delivering Small Group Literacy: A Model

developed by Barbara Fretz

Core Literacy Waterloo Region, Inc.

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Abstract

This article outlines a model for delivering small group literacy to adult learners. The model provides a four step implementation plan: preparing for a group, getting started with a group, developing the group, and bringing the cycle to a close. The word 'group tutor' is used in place of group leader or instructor in order to broaden the spectrum to include volunteer tutors as well as other types of adult educators. This model was developed as part of a project to design a comprehensive training package for volunteer literacy tutors in Ontario.

Introduction

In recent years a general consensus has been reached within the adult literacy field that small group learning is both a valuable and an effective approach to learning. As many adult literacy programs are now considering adding small groups to their existing programs, many practical questions emerge: *How do we get started? How do we convince our one-to-one learners to try a group format? How do we recruit tutors and learners? What about training for tutors? How should staff support the group tutor and learners once the groups are formed? How many people should be in a group? How can we ensure that the group tutor and the learners are committed to the group process? Should groups contain mixed levels?*

The model developed below attempts to address some of these questions. Keep in mind that this model is NOT the definitive statement on small group implementation, but reflects a point of departure for 'getting started'. Only through trial and error and further investigation can we continue to improve and develop our programs.

Data for this model was derived from a review of the literature on small group learning, interviews with small group practitioners, and from on-site pilot testing at six community-based literacy programs in Ontario.

Steps to Implementing Small Group Literacy

1. Preparing for the Group
- Building Tutor Commitment
- Tutor Orientation Training
- Learner Orientation to Small Group Process
- Planning Group Logistics: group size, matching tutors and learners, physical setting, scheduling meetings, levels

2. Getting Started with a Group
- Bridging Individual & Group Goals
- Apprenticeship Training for Tutors

3. Developing the Group
- Tutor Support: ongoing training, get-togethers, co-tutoring
- Peer Learning: learning from each other
- Checking Progress: changing or redefining goals

4. Bringing the Cycle to a Close
- The Group Cycle
- Final Evaluation: determining the effectiveness of the group; dissolving, reforming, or making a decision to continue the existing group into a new cycle.

Definition of Small Group Literacy Learning

- more than 2 people; preferably between 4-10
- group members work cooperatively: interdependence/a division of labour exists
- learners' individual goals are addressed
- learners and the tutor agree to a common set of group goals
- learners and the tutor collaboratively evaluate the group process
- building interpersonal relationships is important
- members give and receive information: they share with and listen to each other
- group members enjoy working with others
- each member has defined roles and responsibilities
- the tutor facilitates learner self-direction: situations are created which allow learners to move from a state of dependence to one of independence around their learning programs
- peer learning and tutoring occurs naturally
- the tutor is trained in facilitating the small group process
- members are aware of their own learning style and how it impacts their learning
- the tutor is also aware of his or her training style and how it impacts the group

Steps to Implementing Small Group Literacy

1. Preparing the Group

Making the Transition from One-to-One to Small Group Literacy

How do learners get interested in a small group? What if there is reluctance to join a small group?

Here is one literacy program's experience delivering small group literacy:

> *Moving from one-to-one to small group literacy was a "long and tortuous process" according to coordinator/trainer Gary Murphy of Literacy Volunteers of New York City. At the beginning learners and experienced one-to-one tutors were reticent to join a small group. Success occurred when the coordinators got really excited and pushed the idea and then their excitement wore off on the tutors and learners.*

Other Recruitment Strategies

- small group learners call or speak directly to one-to-one learners. Invite them to observe or take part in a small group session. (This could also be done through the Learners Committee if one exists in your program).
- advertise your small group program through a newsletter, banner, or during a special event
- provide orientation training sessions for new tutors
- orient new learners to small group learning during intake or at a special presentation: outline how the group will function[1]
- small group tutors discuss the merits of small group learning during social events or at tutor get-togethers (especially in program's making the transition from one-to-one tutoring)

Retention Strategies

- agree to common expectations: set ground rules that all group members can 'live with'

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[1]In her study of group literacy instruction in Tennessee, Bingman (1989) found that group membership was highly affected by a student orientation. She notes that orientations which bring together potential new students and 'veteran' students were the most effective in recruiting and retaining new students. Demonstrating to new students that they are not isolated, but part of a group is the best retention tool.

- if a learner is frequently absent from the group, contact them by phone or make a home visit (when appropriate) and welcome them back
- remain flexible and open: because adult lives are hectic and learning must sometimes be squeezed into a daily schedule, avoid forcing people to come to group meetings
- regularly evaluate progress: adults need to know if they are meeting their goals. Drop out often occurs when adults feel they are not learning what they wish.

Tutor Commitment

To ensure successful small group learning, tutors need to be committed. This includes commitment to: the program's philosophy and expectations of their small group tutors, training and ongoing development, documenting and reporting, spending time preparing for group sessions, and developing learner independence.

Here are some ideas about building tutor commitment from programs running small groups:

- tutors must enjoy working in a group
- the time commitment is laid out seriously – tutors sign a one year 'contract' at intake
- a two hour information session gives potential tutors the philosophy of the organization, its expectations, and options for other volunteer work if necessary
- be clear about the amount of preparation time needed for a literacy session (for example, one hour of preparation for each three hour session).

Tutor Training

1. Orientation

2. Follow-up or ongoing

1. Orientation Training

The first question to ask is: *How does small group training fit into our existing programs and the organization as a whole?* For example, programs incorporating small group literacy into their one-to-one program will have a pool of experienced tutors. Therefore, the content and length of the orientation training will differ from organizations where all or most tutors are coming in "from the street" (see ***Models for Implementing Small Group Tutor Training***).

The amount of orientation training time will depend on the skills and knowledge of the trainee group. However, a minimum of 6 hours to a maximum of 18 hours is a safe estimate. New tutors with neither literacy training nor small group facilitation skills should be required to follow an 18 hour training program. Trainees with experience in both one-to-one literacy and small group work could move to hands-on training (an apprenticeship) after 6 hours of refresher sessions.[2]

2. Follow-Up Training

As with orientation training, the number of follow-up training workshops depends on skills and knowledge. Experienced tutors need not participate in more formal training. Tutors with some experience in either one-to-one or small group facilitation might need 1-2 follow-up training workshops. New tutors should be required to participate in mandatory follow-up training workshops.

Suggested Follow-Up Training:

1) Tutors experienced in both one-to-one and small group literacy: replace formal workshops with a mandatory apprenticeship or co-tutoring.

2) Tutors experienced in either one-to-one or small group: mandatory 3-6 hours of formal training

3) New Tutors: mandatory 3-6 hours of formal training.[3]

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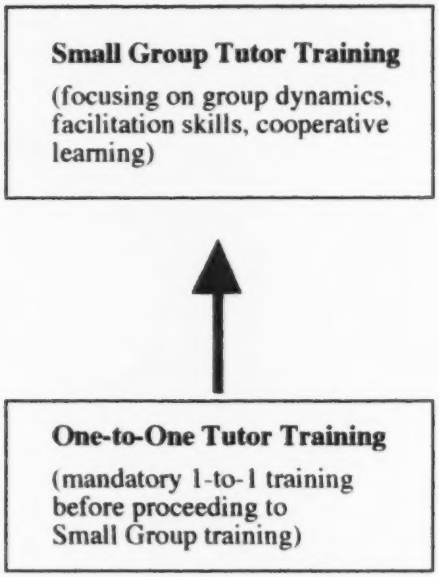
[2]Orientation training for new tutors at Literacy Volunteers of New York City includes 21 hours – 7 sessions of 3 hours. Do tutors complain about the length of training? Gary Murphy, coordinator, says there is always of waiting list and that speaks for itself.

[3]New Tutors at Literacy Volunteers of New York City are required to participate in 7 hours follow-up training for a grand total of 30 hours of training!

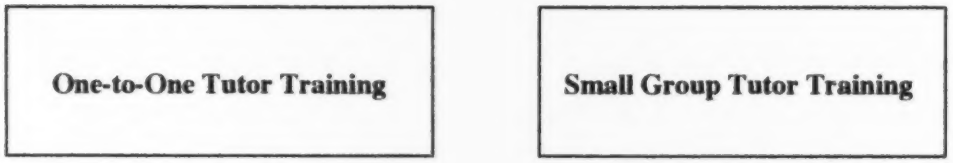
Models for Implementing Small Group Tutor Training

Model 1: The Hierarchy


Small Group Tutor Training
(focusing on group dynamics, facilitation skills, cooperative learning)
One-to-One Tutor Training
(mandatory 1-to-1 training before proceeding to Small Group training)

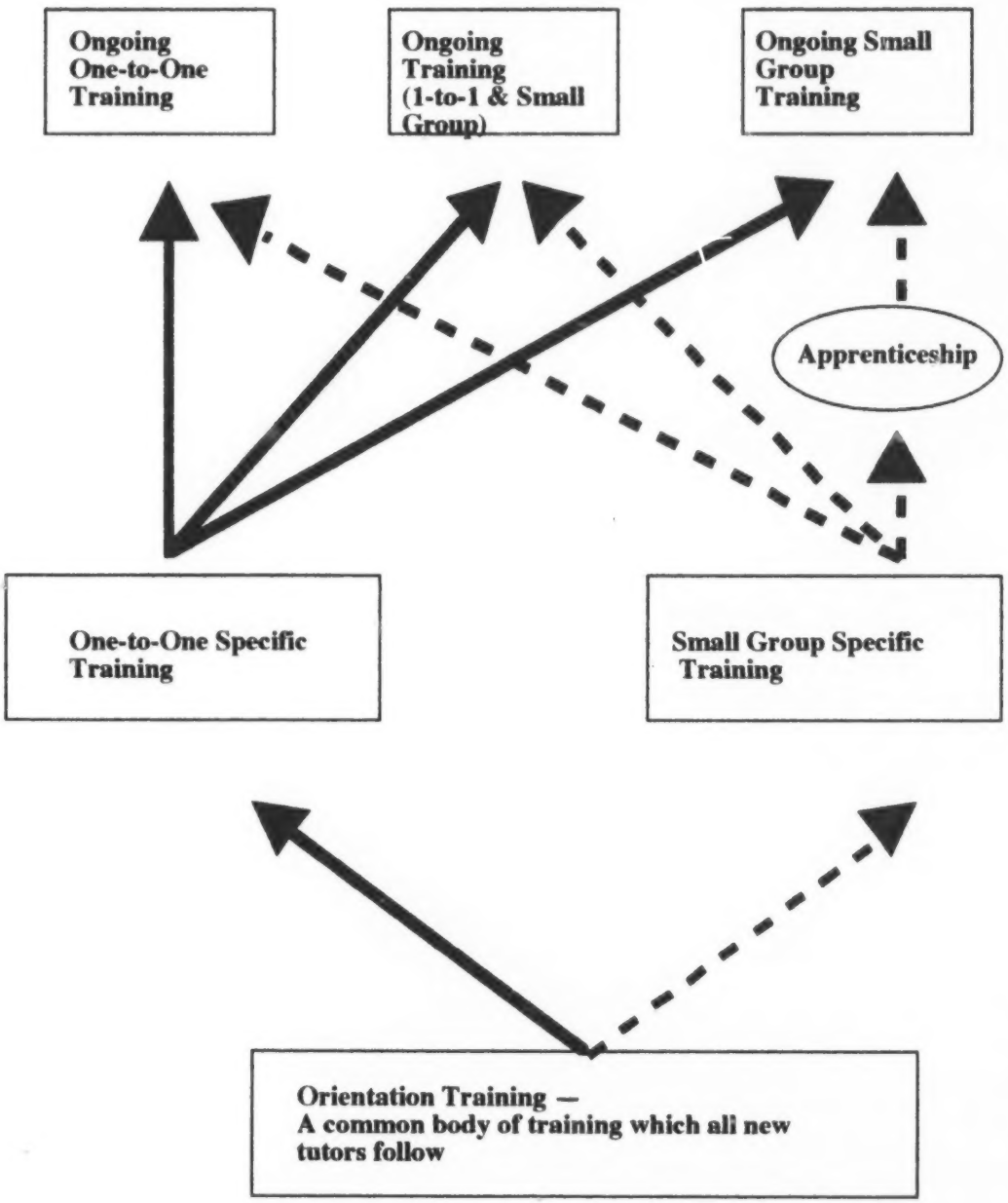
Model 2: Stand Alone Training

Tutors take either one-to-one or small group training.
There is no preferred first step.



Models for Implementing Small Group Tutor Training

Model 3: Mixture


Ongoing One-to-One Training
Ongoing Training (1-to-1 & Small Group)
Ongoing Small Group Training
Apprenticeship
One-to-One Specific Training
Small Group Specific Training
Orientation Training — A common body of training which all new tutors follow

Learner Training

Orientation can range from 1-3 sessions. The first session would provide an overview of small group learning and what to expect. Subsequent sessions can focus on hands-on activities.

Why orient potential new learners to small group literacy?

- learners experience the small group process in action
- outlines the program's expectations
- gives learners information about the program
- helps match learners' needs to a group
- breaks down barrier of isolation; learners see that they are not "the only one"

Logistical Considerations

1. Physical Setting
2. Group Size
3. Frequency & Length of Sessions
4. Levels

1. Physical Setting: spacious, movable chairs and tables, comfortable furniture, coffee, good lighting, quiet, moderate temperature

2. Group Size:

- there is some agreement that 6-8 is a perfect number; between 5-10 is appropriate
- very small groups don't work; if one member drops out, the whole group dissolves
- need enough members so pairs, triads, and quads can be used
- if the group is too large, it is harder to share floor time and harder to set group goals. Some learners might be more inhibited to participate in a larger group.

3. Frequency & Length of Sessions:

The higher frequency the more opportunity a group has to solidify and build trust and cohesion.

- some small groups run everyday for 2-3 hours
- a few groups meet only once a week for 2-3 hours
- *most groups meet twice a week for 2-3 hours (4-6 hours)*
- some group meet up to four hours per session

4. Levels: "To mix or not to mix?" Heterogeneity or Homogeneity

Remember:

ALL groups are heterogeneous! Each group represents a mix of background experiences, interests, needs, attitudes, etc.

There are advantages and disadvantages to mixed levels.

There are many techniques and activities which are used to facilitate learning in mixed level groups.

Heterogeneous Groups

Most academics and practitioners agree that 'mixed' groups are ideally the best practice; however, their implementation presents a number of barriers for both the tutor and the learners.

Benefits:

- exposure to new ideas and approaches
- learn from others
- more realistic; in the 'real world' mixed groups are the norm

Barriers:

- harder to develop common goals
- difficult to form a group around one theme
- requires more preparation time
- possibility of conflicts due to differences
- new tutors might be reluctant to join a mixed level group

Overcoming Barriers:

- use a reading/writing process model[4] – using a whole group discussion at the beginning of each session brings the group together to share their individual ideas and work
- use peer tutoring/ learning
- use thematic or special interest groups in which all levels can participate, e.g., sewing, arts and crafts, employment, women's issues

Homogeneous Groups:

Homogeneous groups are best suited to certain kinds of special interest groups, for example, advanced writing skills, GED preparation, and English as a Second Language

Advantages:

- easier to set group goals
- easier for the tutor to plan and manage
- perhaps more immediate bonding of group members around their commonalties

Disadvantages:

- less diversity of thoughts, ideas, and approaches

Special Needs Learners: To integrate or not??

During a 1992 research study on learner involvement in community-based literacy programs in Ontario, we met and talked to a group of learners representing a very heterogeneous mix. Within the group were both physical and learning disabled learners working with the able-bodied. Able-bodied learners expressed that their initial reactions as nervousness and uncomfort. However, it did not take long for the group to solidify. According to the learners, the group's success was due in part to the use of peer tutoring. All the able-bodied learners agreed that they not only enjoyed working with the disabled learners, but believed it made the group 'better'.[5]

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[4]See Cheatham, J. & Lawson, V. 1990. ***Small Group Tutoring: A Collaborative Approach for Literacy Instruction.*** Syracuse, New York: Literacy Volunteers of America

[5]Duff-McCracken, D. & Fretz, B. 1991. ***Learner Involvement in Community-Based Literacy Programs: A Discussion Paper.*** Kitchener, Ontario: Core Literacy Waterloo Region, Inc.

2. Getting Started with a Group

Bridging individual & group needs: Are group goals necessary?

Many groups do not have designated group goals. In these groups the emphasis is on the attainment of individual goals. Rather than focusing on group building and interpersonal relationships, these groups are a forum for feedback on one's individual work. The only difference between these groups and one-to-one tutoring is that learners meet in the same location and at the same time.

Importance of Setting Group Goals

- builds group cohesiveness through cooperation
- internal motivation to achieve the end creates full participation
- a shared vision cuts down on conflict of interests and builds group stability
- clarifies individual's role & responsibilities for the group

How to Set Group Goals

During intake the program coordinator will collect information about the individual's interests, needs, and learning goals. This information should be passed on to the group tutor to be used as a *preliminary step* in formulating group goals. Note that it is not the role of the group tutor to unilaterally develop the goals for the group. Setting goals is an opportunity for all group members to participate equally in sharing their needs and agreeing to a common set of goals.

There are a number of different activities and techniques which allow a group to come up with a common set of goals.[6] Ideally, it would be preferable to have each learner articulate their needs and goals without the help of the group tutor. However, some group members might be reticent to open up to strangers. In this case, individual needs expressed during learner intake can be listed and used as a springboard to a whole group discussion. Before doing this, however, ensure that the learners have agreed to disclosing this information; otherwise, they might view this as a breach of confidence.

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[6]See Fretz, B. & Paul, M. 1993. ***Learning Together: Small Group Literacy Learning***. Kitchener, Ontario: Core Literacy Waterloo Region, Inc.

Apprenticeship Training for Tutors

Apprenticeship training includes 3-4 weeks of observing and trying out techniques with a 'master tutor'. A master tutor is not simply a tutor with small group literacy experience. A master tutor is someone who is also able to train someone in the necessary skills, techniques and approaches. Training includes demonstrating the skills, then giving an opportunity to experiment and practise, and finally, evaluating the new tutor's progress.

All new tutors should participate in an apprenticeship, especially tutors who are new to both literacy and small group process. For experienced one-to-one tutors, the apprenticeship should focus on small group dynamics, such as facilitation skills, group decision-making, and conflict resolution.

Benefits:

- safe, slow way to learn about small group process
- the new tutor has someone to answer questions when they arise
- the new tutor can interact with learners and get their feedback on his or her budding skills
- observe techniques, activities, strategies in progress
- hands-on practice

Barriers:

- not all experienced tutors are able to mentor and support new tutors; program coordinators might want to 'train the trainer'
- there might not be enough 'master tutors' available in your program to provide each new tutor with an apprenticeship. If so, several new tutors might work together with one master tutor.
- training an apprentice requires extra preparation time and work for a master tutor

3. Developing the Group

Tutor Support

Types of Support

1) Ongoing Training Workshops

2) Co-Tutoring

3) Tutor Get-Togethers

1) Ongoing Training Workshops

Ongoing or follow-up workshops exist in some form in most literacy programs. For the most part, they tend to be haphazardly scheduled – whenever the program coordinator perceives a specific need. Regular, ongoing training is essential to the quality and success of literacy programs. Therefore, follow-up training needs to be integrated into the program as a whole.

Benefits:

- tutors need to 'keep up' with changes in the field
- tutors desire fresh approaches and strategies
- bringing in speakers from different sectors in the community gives tutors new perspectives
- expand on ideas, techniques, and skills introduced in orientation training

Barriers:

- turn out continues to be a problem at workshops, especially when attendance is not mandatory
- some tutors do not like a structured forum in which someone is banking them with information, but prefer an open forum discussion
- if the commitment to ongoing training has not been laid out at the beginning, a tutor might resent the extra time requirement

2) Co-tutoring

Benefits:

- less pressure on a tutor to perform – attend meetings, spend time planning
- tutors learn from each other; synergy, get new ideas
- tutors role model working together for learners
- ensures that the group is not without a tutor if one is absent
- check and balance: a way to make sure that tutors are 'on track'

Barriers:

- some tutors do not plan together or communicate enough
- co-tutors might have philosophical and personality differences
- requires scheduling meetings when both tutors are available

3) Tutor Get-Togethers

Schedule regular tutor get-togethers or open forum discussions for ALL tutors.

Benefits:

- time to share and compare ideas in a relaxed environment
- concerns and problems are discussed, solutions created
- socialize with other tutors
- informal approach allows tutors to open up and share their feelings

Barriers:

- some tutors prefer a structured workshop where new information is presented by a trainer or an 'expert'
- low turnout to meetings
- might need to find or train a group facilitator for the meetings

Peer Learning & Tutoring

Peer learning and tutoring is critical to small group literacy learning. For a group to function effectively, group members need to give and receive information from each other. Without this reciprocity, the group breaks down into individual units working independently of or at cross purpose to each other.

Reasons for promoting peer learning:

- builds self-esteem: when learners share their skills and expertise with others, it values what they know
- skill building: 'tutoring' another person requires a deep understanding of the materials; explaining a concept or idea is a skill in itself
- natural behaviour: people like to help each other
- less threatening: learners might feel more comfortable working with a peer, rather than a tutor whom they might perceive as a 'teacher' or someone in authority

Checking Progress (Formative evaluation)

Purposes

- to check progress
- to determine whether the group tutor, learners, and program coordinators feel that the group is meeting their expectations
- change or redefine goals

Ask: *"How can we make the group work better?"*

Who Checks Progress (see ***Evaluation Model for Small Group Learning***)

- self-evaluation
- peer feedback (to individual learners and the whole group)
- tutor feedback (to individuals and the whole group)
- program coordinator feedback (to the tutor, learners, the whole group)

How to Check Progress of an Individual and the Whole Group

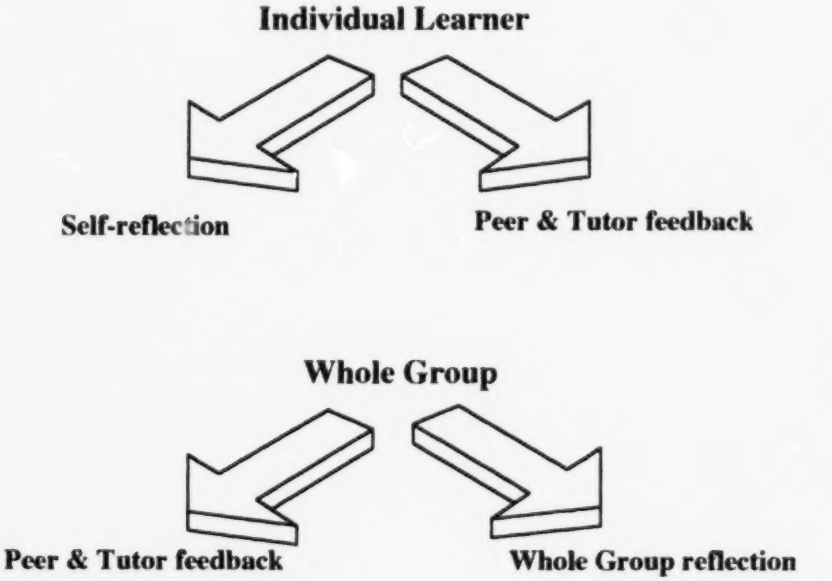
Here are some ways to check individual progress:

- write a personal learning journal of feelings around learning
- meet short term goals
- compile portfolios: compare past work to see improvements over time
- rate one's feelings on a scale or grid
- make audio or visual tapes of conversations, presentations for self-correction
- ask for informal comments from peers: *"How do you think I'm doing?"*
- use peer correction
- group tutor keeps detailed observation notes of each learner
- group tutor 'conferences' with each learner using a set of questions developed by both the tutor and the learners
- take short quizzes in math, spelling, etc.

Here are some ways to check the group's progress.

- open forum discussion: *"How do we feel as a group about...?"*
- compare initial group goals with those met 'so far'
- revisit ground rules and responsibilities to determine usefulness
- survey opinions of group members via a written questionnaire
- group tutor keeps detailed observation notes (a journal) of group dynamics, for example, interpersonal relationships, conflict resolutions strategies, communication patterns, etc.
- group tutor keeps records of group projects, presentations, etc.

Evaluation Model for Small Group Learning



4. Bringing the Cycle to a Close

The Group Cycle

Each group has 'a cycle' or stages of development. However, different groups develop at different rates. The beginning stages are marked by learner dependence on the leadership of the group tutor while in the later stages, learners take control of planning and decision making.

Setting a time frame for a group cycle (e.g. a term, a season, a year) is advised. Tutors and learners take on different roles and responsibilities at each stage of the cycle. Therefore, breaking the stages into specific time periods can help to clarify when roles should change. For example, if your cycle is a four month term, by the mid.way point learners should be starting to set goals, evaluate progress, and make decisions as a group, rather than at the advice of the group tutor.

Reasons for using a designated time frame:

- using a 'semester system' ensures that closure is built in
- group trust and cohesion develops: move away from continuous intake (bringing new members into the group after it has started) which breaks group continuity
- evaluation (both ongoing and final) can be introduced more easily. Built in closure ensures that the group will be evaluated at least once
- it clarifies tutors' and learners' changing roles and responsibilities

Final Evaluation (Summative)

Is small group literacy a valuable learning model for the learners in your program?

Planning and implementing a small group program requires that the above question is addressed both during and at the end of the group's cycle. Without evaluating your small group, how will you know to continue into a new cycle? How will you know if the learners learned what they needed? How will you know if the group enjoyed working together?

Final or summative evaluation is designed to judge the value of the small group experience and make decisions about the future.

Ask: *"Was the group successful in meeting its goals?" "Should we continue into a new cycle?" "Is what we set out to do and ended up with the same?"*

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Interviews:

Gary Murphy, Coordinator, Literacy Volunteers of New York City.
** Providing exclusively a small group approach, Literacy Volunteers of NYC is a community-based program with many years of experience in small group literacy for adults. Volunteers from the community are trained on-site as group tutors.*

Guy Ewing, Former Coordinator, Parkdale Project Read, Toronto, Ontario
** Parkdale has provided small group literacy learning in Toronto's westend for a number of years. Using a learner-centred approach, learners are required to take responsibility for their own planning and decision making within their groups. Group tutors are a mix of both volunteers and paid staff.*